

*The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a [trptych](#) painted by the [early Netherlandish](#) master [Hieronymus Bosch](#) (c. 1450–1516), housed in the [Museo del Prado](#) in [Madrid](#) since 1939. Dating from between 1490 and 1510, when Bosch was about 40 or 50 years old,[\[1\]](#) it is his best-known[\[2\]](#) and most ambitious work.[\[3\]](#) The [masterpiece](#) reveals the artist at the height of his powers; in no other painting does he achieve such complexity of meaning or such vivid imagery.[\[4\]](#) It depicts several [Biblical](#) scenes on a grand scale and as a "true triptych", as defined by Hans Belting,[\[5\]](#) was perhaps intended to illustrate the history of mankind according to [medieval Christian doctrine](#).

The triptych is painted in [oil](#) and comprises a square middle panel flanked by two rectangular wings that can close over the center as shutters. These outer wings, when folded shut, display a [grisaille](#) painting of the earth during the [Creation](#). The three scenes of the inner triptych are probably (but not necessarily) intended to be read chronologically from left to right. The left panel depicts God presenting to [Adam](#) the newly created [Eve](#), while the central panel is a broad panorama of sexually engaged nude figures, fantastical animals, oversized fruit and hybrid stone formations. The right panel is a hellscape and portrays the torments of [damnation](#).

Art historians and critics frequently interpret the painting as a didactic warning on the perils of life's temptations.[\[6\]](#) However the intricacy of its symbolism, particularly that of the central panel, has led to a wide range of scholarly interpretations over the centuries.[\[7\]](#) 20th-century art historians are divided as to whether the triptych's central panel is a moral warning or a panorama of paradise lost. American writer [Peter S. Beagle](#) describes it as an "erotic derangement that turns us all into [voyeurs](#), a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty".[\[8\]](#)

During his life, Bosch painted three large triptychs in which each panel was essential to the meaning of the whole. Each of these three works presents distinct yet linked themes addressing history and faith. Triptychs from this period were generally intended to be read

sequentially, the left and right panels often portraying Eden and the **Last Judgment** respectively, while the **subtext** was contained in the center piece.[9] It is not known whether "The Garden" was intended as an **altarpiece**, but the general view is that the extreme subject matter of the inner center and right panels make it unlikely that it was intended to function in a church or monastery, but was instead commissioned by a **lay patron**. [10]